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DE RUEHKU #4205/01 2960618
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P 230618Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7286
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 004205

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2016
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SUBJECT: SPLITS EMERGING IN PARLIAMENT'S 17-MEMBER ISLAMIC BLOC

REF: KUWAIT 3826

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary and comment: Splits within the 17-member Islamic Bloc have recently surfaced. The tensions are largely between independent Islamists and those affiliated with a political association outside Parliament. While the two groups agree on fundamental issues, they differ over proposed "grillings" of ministers. According to one Islamist parliamentarian (MP), these tensions have always existed within the bloc and are not particularly serious. Another Islamist MP differed with this view, arguing that the disagreements were more strident than reported in the press. Despite their differences, Islamists are likely to remain a strong, vocal opposition in Parliament. The Islamic Bloc's adoption of a "majority rules" decision-making system may increase the influence in Parliament of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, whose six MPs are all members of the Islamic Bloc. End summary and comment.

Splits in Islamic Bloc (Re-)Emerge

¶2. (C/NF) Splits have emerged recently in the 17-member Islamic Bloc in Parliament. Although Islamist parliamentarians (MPs) have publicly denied the reports, they have privately admitted that there are significant differences within the bloc over certain issues, primarily ministerial "grillings." The tensions seem exacerbated in part by the bloc's recent establishment of an Executive Bureau, headed by former Minister of Justice Ahmed Al-Baqer, and adoption of a "majority rules" system, requiring its members to vote in Parliament with the majority in the bloc. This is not the first time feuds within the bloc have become public. In February, local press speculated that Khaled Al-Adwa, Hussein Mezyid, and former MP Mekhled Al-Azmi might leave the bloc, a split that never materialized.

¶3. (C/NF) The rifts surfaced publicly at the beginning of October when members of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, threatened to grill Minister of Commerce and Industry Falah Al-Hajeri over alleged corruption in the Public Authority for Industry (PAI). (Note: Al-Hajeri, an independent Islamist, was appointed Commerce Minister after being elected to Parliament for the first time in June. End note.) MP Khaled Al-Adwa, an independent Islamist from the same area as Al-Hajeri, defended the Minister and called on other members of the Islamic Bloc to give him more time to address their concerns. ICM MP Jaman Al-Hirbish, who like the other five ICM MPs in Parliament is a member of the Islamic Bloc, lashed out at Al-Adwa in statements to the press, accusing him of "being ignorant and resorting to cheap tricks to please the

minister." Several other Islamic Bloc members similarly criticized Al-Adwa, saying he had become "a burden," and threatened to expel him for making public statements on key issues without coordinating with the bloc in advance. Al-Adwa reportedly later "apologized" to the bloc for his statements. (Comment: Some observers have suggested the ICM's real purpose in grilling the Minister is to force the Government to replace him with one of their own. End comment.)

Differences Over Loyalties, Not Issues

¶4. (C/NF) ICM MP Dr. Nasser Al-Sane told Poloff October 10 that there have always been tensions in the Islamic Bloc between independent Islamists and those affiliated with political associations, which while technically not legal operate as de facto political parties outside Parliament. He explained that of the bloc's 17 members, six were from the ICM, two were from the Salafi Movement, and three were "close" to these associations, likely a reference to MPs Dr. Waleed Al-Tabtabaei, Faisal Al-Mislim, and Abdullah Akkash. Al-Sane said the other six IB members were independents who did not want to go along with the majority when it ran counter to their tribal or personal interests, which caused rifts with the rest of the bloc. He noted, however, that these MPs were under increasing pressure from their constituents to be a part of and comply with the bloc. When local newspapers reported they might be kicked out, they agreed to accept the majority's position and asked the bloc to issue statements confirming their membership. The only cases where the majority opinion is not enforced are ministerial "grillings" and issues the majority agrees should be left to the MPs' discretion. An indirect result of this

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decision could be to increase the influence of the ICM within the bloc and Parliament.

¶5. (C/NF) In an October 17 meeting, Adel Al-Sarawi, an independent member of the Islamist Bloc, said the splits were even more contentious than reported in the press. Echoing Al-Sane, he attributed the differences to tensions between independent, tribal Islamists and those affiliated with a political association outside Parliament, rather than disagreements over specific policy issues. He explained that politically-affiliated members came to the bloc's meetings with pre-determined positions decided by their organization's leadership, something that frustrated the independent Islamists. Al-Sarawi said independent Islamists' positions were sometimes driven by familial or tribal considerations, such as when a corruption case involved a relative or friend, further fueling disagreements within the bloc. He also noted that some members of the bloc or their organizations had worked against each other during the June elections, creating tensions that still remained. Al-Sarawi complained that the bloc was "infiltrated by the Government," claiming some members reported the contents of meetings to the Government. He denied that any one group within the bloc was trying to impose its agenda on the bloc's other members.

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